

Balthus' Picture-Book, Chapter Two:

The Self-Portraits

From the very outset of his career Balthus has been concerned with the nature of the artist. Perhaps more than any other single problem, this one provides the structure within which to trace the development of his thought. In the following "portraits of the artist" one can see his understanding develop from tripartite and dual icons in which the artist's nature is shown as composite, towards representations of the artist which, whether composite or single, address more particularly what the making of art demands and what the act of aesthetic apprehension is. That tension felt in the early works between the different aspects of the artist's nature gradually migrates outward, to locate itself between the increasingly whole and simple sense of the artist, and that world of phenomena which invites the restrained efforts at ordering and capture to which his card-players attest.

1. "The Quays" (1929), an early "portrait of the artist," contains a fragmentation into figures who will become quite familiar hereafter. The odd working-class woman who will soon metamorphose into Nelly Dean, the pivotal, asexual narrator of the *Wuthering Heights* saga, stands in profile at left, holding a lively cat who stares out at us. Nelly Dean is the maker personality--- the

controlling intelligence of the violent, passionate world transmuted into art-- who supports and controls the animal id that is another one of Balthus' selves. The Nelly figure observes the two figures passing, each striding along obliviously involved in the prosaic story that is his life. Though Nelly straitly observes these two figures enmeshed in life, as the authorial intelligence must do, the cat stares out at us, and away from them, as though to recognize, and challenge, the observer standing in the gallery. Meanwhile, the figure of the educated man, always an afterthought for Balthus, and the least compelling image of himself, despite its superficial accuracy, stands above the quay's wall, staring down at Nelly holding her cat. This male-female-animal trio on the left-hand side of the picture is the first iconographic portrait of the artist.

Where else could such a portrait be set but Paris, the justly proportioned city, a work of art in itself, the unsurpassable urban emblem of order and passion, with its river embracing islands studded with mansions and churches and prisons, one bank lined with bookstalls, the other with palaces?

Balthus is young, and this image of his stance in a marvelous city is hopeful and secure.

2 All the more surprising then is the violent self-realization evident in "The Guitar Lesson" ((1934). Were it not that the artist has suffered the creation of two major paintings-- "The Street" and "Cathy Dressing" -- in the intervening five years, one would hardly know from where so intense a vision of ravishment

comes. For the young girl is Balthus again, posed as a pietà, and exposed with such explicitness that one sees that this martyr is female. A guitar lies on the floor, not only to denote the ostensible purpose of the visit, to but to make clear that the young girl is another instrument; the teacher holds the girl precisely as though she were a guitar, so that we must see that she is played upon, even as she is violated, by a greater feminine power, to make a fearful music.

This is perhaps the most powerful instance of Balthus' identification of people and objects, in which the object, as an alter ego of the artist, makes clearly the point that to be an artist is to be a vehicle of the making of art; that such making is a perpetration of sensual violence, by sadistic and nourishing cosmic power, and that the artist is as helpless and sensitive before the power that uses him as any guitar or piano. Once again Balthus' sense that the natural power of the universe is a feminine power, and that artist are feminine vehicles of this power, is clearly conveyed.

What "The Guitar Lesson" unconsciously revives is the theme of that rare group in Flemish painting, "The Throne of Grace," in which God the Father holds his martyred son, one hand supporting his torso, one hand placed upon the Christ's groin. The strange gesture refers to in the incarnation of God into a human body by emphasizing that body's most vulnerable portion. The incarnate God lies in the arms of the all-powerful, cosmic God. In Balthus' revision the teacher holds the girl in such a way as to exhibit Christ's incarnation as a young girl; the young girl wears a red jacket as the emblem of her passion, and exposes

her teacher's breast so that we must read the woman not merely as violator but as nurturer; these gestures link the couple in the reciprocity of need that establishes them as inseparable, and makes of them an image of the artist in relation to the ground of his being. They inhabit the recurrent barred-wallpaper room, the prison of existence, the room where music is made.

Faced with Balthus' recasting of this pietà into a duet of females, we may find a clue as to why the Son of God, the artist as martyr, who suffers violation in the attempt to "learn music" and thereby carry on the artistic tradition, must become a Daughter instead. For the figure of the daughter-- like the disowned younger son who inherits nothing, and thus turns to the making of art to shore up that sense of omnipotence which the world will not confirm-- embodies a harsh destiny as filial inheritor, which the artist at any time and place has to accept. Like Beatrice Cenci, with whom, in Artaud's production, Balthus must already have been involved that same year, the artist must either submit to the incestuous demands of the father's voice and need, as embodied in civilized tradition, and give himself up to rules and experience which he may not seek to modify, but must live unquestioningly within; or, he must accept the death of the self. This death may be accomplished in two ways; one may die to oneself through renunciation of aspiration and significant action, and keep the world one has known; or, one may die to the familiar world through the ultimate ravishment of artistic commitment.

3. Like the royal daughter in the fairy-tale "*Peau d'Ane*" ("Donkey Skin"), who flees her father's palace when that widower intends to marry her; who cloaks herself in an animal's pelt to conceal her beauty and identity, trusting to the very skin of nature to keep her from the threat of the king, Balthus evades the demands of the desirous paternal culture when he flees to the land of imagination as "*His Majesty King of Cats*" (1935). For in this next self-portrait, the presumptuous animal of "*The Quays*" has moved into the foreground, taking pride of place, and graciously lending itself to the artist for titulary purposes.

It is 1935 and the artist has turned about, portraying himself not indirectly, as in "*The Guitar Lesson*," nor as a complex, many-faceted intelligence, as he did in "*The Quays*," but as a character in a mysterious, unwritten narrative. This picture, which he gave to a young English woman whose corresponding epithet was "*Queen of the Forests*" suggests that the magical text for which this painting is the only surviving illustration, was the tale of their love, just as the grim expression on the artist's face suggests that for him, the story of the King of Cats and the Queen of the Forests has come to an end.

Why cats? This is the animal who appears throughout Balthus' oeuvre, ubiquitous almost as a signature, again and again. The tradition of regarding cats as magically efficacious beings has long been tremendously powerful in France. Because cats, as animals, seem to possess a kind of knowledge which we recognize as "human," that is, intellectual, calm, and clear, while simultaneously symbolizing, in their animal form, the human eroticism of their owners--

because, as images, they embody “the humanity in animals along with the animality of men-- and especially of women,”* they have something in common with artists, another set of beings who bridge two worlds while never changing their outward form. Having peculiar and natural access to two spheres of experience, the mundane and the magically “other,” it is not surprising to find these animals associated with hieratic figures such as priests or those outlaw priestesses, witches, and sometimes metonymically taking their places.

Mysteriously able to travel back and forth between the human and inhuman realms, able to exist in either, but never at home except in the unmappable, mental realm whose boundaries are unphysical and unknown, both cat and artist are exiled monarchs, disinherited noblemen such as Balthus, with his mysterious Polish ancestry, has sometimes fancied himself to be. With his great, somewhat ironical gift for perceiving the place we all must take, as we live, in a set of pre-established eternal stories, Balthus here assumes the pose of the most memorable disinherited noble of them all, Prince Hamlet, by borrowing the stance and persona adopted by yet another great painter, Delacroix, in his self-portrait as Hamlet. The illegitimate son of Talleyrand, Delacroix had ample reason to conceive of himself fantastically as Hamlet, too.

So “The King of Cats” implies the story of a nation of cats (who by instinct recognize no boundaries) where a man is king. In the logic of such stories we understand that this man is also a cat. Rilke, who wrote the preface to Balthus’ early work, the picture-narrative *Mitsou*, understood this quite well when the

artist was only twelve. In this series of ink drawings a boy finds a cat, adopts it, lives with it, integrates it wholly into his life, and then, having gone to sleep with it one night, wakes to discover it gone. He searches for it, but it has vanished beyond retrieval, and the last plate finds the boy alone in his room, in tears. But Rilke, apostrophizing the young artist in his preface, consoles both him and us:

Now loss, cruel as it may be, cannot prevail over possession; it can, if you like, terminate it; it affirms it; in the end it is like a second acquisition, but this time totally interiorized, in another way intense.

Of course, you felt this, Baltusz. No longer able to see Mitsou, you bent your efforts to seeing her even more clearly.

Is she still alive? She lives within you, and her insouciant kitten's frolics that once diverted you now compel you: you fulfilled your obligation through your painstaking melancholy. **

Rilke recognized his young charge's strength and foresaw the course his life would take. For the loss of a pet who could traverse the strange path leading back and forth between the everyday world and the mysterious "other" world, which coexist so absolutely in every one of Balthus' paintings, confirmed the necessity of his making that journey himself, of becoming the cat, of assuming the double persona which the desperation of ineffable loss imposes on those who adopt the life of art for survival's sake. In 1935, Balthus is so secure in the life of art that he can paint himself as King of the invisible nation of that life's inhabitants. With the magical power to evoke possessed by certain single images from classic children's books, this self-portrait makes the most serious joke about the certainty of Balthus' inheritance.

4. In the following year Balthus carried further his notion of the artist as himself a piece of fiction, or a work of art, in his "Portrait of André Derain" (1936), his most successful and serious masculine image. By clothing him in a long dressing gown, Balthus creates a monumental rectangular figure clearly identified with the canvases which lean against the wall in the background. The robe also, by veiling the triangular space between Derain's legs, sets the artist outside the realms of time and story where, detached and gazing with frightening, strange penetration, he exists outside life's mundane vicissitudes, would exist beyond death if he could-- but he too wears the prison-bars of life on his robe, a garment made more passionate by the hopeless aspirations toward immortality it confers on its wearer, in its shape evoking daemonic Renaissance noblemen and ecclesiastics. Balthus' conviction that the artist is a great and powerful aristocrat also inheres in the delicate, poised gesture of Derain's hands. The young female model seated, eyes downcast, behind him, is not only the iconographic attribute that immediately identifies the masterly, brooding figure as an artist; seeming to drowse in her chair, even as her legs suggest a walk arrested by sleep, and half falling out of her clothes in unselfconscious sensuality, the girl is an image of the artist himself in his unconscious moments. She hovers in the background of Derain's studio, phantasmal in color except for the blush in her bodice and cheek, a parallel presence, the vehicle by which a dream may enter the world, experiencer of a force beyond her, to which she completely abandons herself.

Not a muse, but rather the artist's own soul, her presence does more than identify his vocation; it establishes it.

The daemonic physiognomy of the artist stares outward, away from her, towards us, but somewhat above us, as though there were some power to be address and recognized, more fearful than human posterity. But the most important clue to Balthus' sense of the artist's destiny-- his self-knowledge and place in nature-- is given , not in the brooding ambiguity of his gaze but in an unobtrusive detail which sets his existence, as Balthus at this point conceives it, into a timeless and paradoxical context. By setting Derain half within a frame, that of the door behind him, Balthus states that the artist is himself a work of art; yet, as the unframed side of Derain's figure indicates, the true, thinking artist is always larger than the artful creation of himself he concocts, because his own artfulness is the door to further unknown, unimagined things.

5. In the few years that follow, Balthus evokes many times his female self at the age of fourteen, the age at which he would have liked to remain forever. The violently startling picture which follows straight upon the thoughtful young girls of 1937-38, "The Victim" (1939-46) conflates several radically diverse source images into a major revisionist "portrait of the artist." An adolescent girl lies upon a white sheet on a cot in precisely the pose of the Poussin Narcissus that Balthus accepted from Rilke as his mythic persona. The unconscious Narcissus figure, always a girl, who appeared most lately in "The Mountain," is Balthus'

evocation of himself as the artist in his fertile passivity. Yet here the figure out of classical myth borrows a dark dimension of Christian reference through the story implied by the knife which lies on the ground pointing toward her, and the uncharacteristically ascetic rendition of the girl's body. In its slender length, death-like pallor, and the coarse building up of its stony texture into the form of an effigy, this body, lying upon a rumpled sheet which recalls a shroud, summons to mind Western painting's most famous death, that of Christ. Balthus, son of a Gentile and Jew, bears such a loving and critical relation to the stories of Christian legend as only someone born with an ambiguous relation to these traditions can do. Nor is his attitude toward pagan legend as employed by Renaissance and Neo-classical masters any less free. In his mature filial relation to tradition, Balthus revises more than he flees, deeming no pagan or Christian story too sacred to be used for his own purposes. Here he daringly conflates Narcissus and Christ into an image of the artist as child of God, absorber and transcender of violent attack.

But what is the nature of the attack? As the girl shows no wound, and there is no sign of blood, it is possible that she lies in a trance of shock after rape, as does Dorothee in Pierre Jean Jouve's novel of 1935 piece of the same name as this painting, and dedicated to Balthus. The strand of meaning first clearly articulated in "The Guitar Lesson," that of ravishment, appears again here in less bizarre, if no less violent terms. For Balthus' "Victim" presents us with a

composite icon of the artist as sufferer; what varies, depending on which face of the icon one meets, is the nature of the force the artist endures.

The superficial subject of the painting, the young girl, Balthus' figure for the soul of the artist, suffers use at the hands of an assailant who wields a knife and must be, according to the logic of everyday crime as well as of tales of romantic passion, a male, and thus "other." In this first aspect of the artist's identity, it is that which lies over against him which renders his body a vehicle, a sole means to an end, the climax of realization. Here again the object lying in the lower foreground of the pictorial space serves not only to identify the nature of the dramatic event, but to give us further insight into the character that both the figure and the object share. The knife, an instrument used by a powerful unseen force, is an alternative version of the figure of the artist who lies on the shroud. Both artist and knife are instruments of aggressive perpetration; the girl has been ravished by the user of the knife, but she is herself a knife in her true identity. So harshly to stress the instrumentality of the artist by equating him with a bald weapon, is to deglamorize the person of the artist, the egotistical figure the whole world admires, and to invert the romantic notion of self-contained genius. It also causes one to look again more closely at all Balthus' objects, whether they appear in still life arrangements upon which no person obtrudes, or in rooms inhabited by figures.

The knife has appeared before, in the "Still Life" of 1937 in which all Balthus' emblematic objects — glass vessels, a loaf of bread, a plain table and

chair, a rumpled drape-- group together in a scene which suggests a complicated, residual violence. The knife lodges in the torn loaf, and glints of red paint accent both. In the context of so many objects to which tradition accords such high symbolic value, and in that of Balthus' other usages, it is tempting to read in the knife in the bread a reference to Christ's martyrdom as a kind of paradigm of violence, from which the smashing of all other vessels of vision and dream, by such blunt, unsubtle instruments as hammers, must derive by the necessity of precedent and the ineluctable fate of retelling. And in "Still Life with a Figure" ("Le Gouter")(1940), painted during the same period as "The Victim," the knife lodged in the loaf, piercing all the way through it, appears once again in an unmistakable symbolic context, close under the hailing gesture of the girl who is an angel, next to the glass of wine which further identifies the bread as an emblem of Christ, on a table also occupied by a wonderful bowl of red-green apples, the tense, living sign of temptation.

In her aspect of Narcissus, the girl in "The Victim" suffers no less, if differently, than in her first aspect, as instrument of an all-powerful ravisher. In her trance of dream she endures some dream for which she is not responsible; but beyond that, as Narcissus, the sufferer of an extreme passion for his own reflection, the artist is the victim of what is the same as himself: the physical world, the myriad phenomena of nature that share mortality with him, the loveliness glimpsed in the pool, out of the window, through the page of a book, the frame of a picture.

The aspect of Christ encompasses these two modes of suffering. For, depending on whether one regards him as mortal or God, Christ is the victim of what is the same as himself, and of what lies over against him. Here we can see Balthus asserting his equal sympathy with the force that uses the creator, the Creator, and with the instrument used by that force. Even in this his most passive image of the artist, Balthus manages to subvert his own message by conflating the signature of himself with the icon of the dead God. The conviction of power paradoxically prevails over the carefully constructed idea of the artist as ultimate sufferer.

6. It is then a happy fact that in Balthus' next portrait of the artist, "The Méditerranée's Cat" (1949), the struggle over usage and power is clearly resolved in the artist's favor. This painting is one of the few works he painted expressly for a public occasion for it was to hang in a fine seafood restaurant where he often dined, across from the Odéon Theater. The composition presents us with a great circle of life, which one reads clockwise from the girl in the boat in the lower left middle ground. Balthus' other self, the girl as experiencer of nature, waves at us as she sets out to sea, the prow of her boat pointing up towards the storm, which she prepares cheerfully to brave. Behind this figure, and directly above her head, a rainbow rises out of the water in the middle distance, and arches across the sky to bar the storm that hangs threatening above it. But a third of the way through its arc, the rainbow breaks into a flight of fish which stream

down the determined arc to land on the plate of a sailor with a cat's head. He sits on the quay that occupies the right foreground, ready to dine. So one promise, that of God not to destroy the earth, metamorphoses into another, the fish, symbol of Christ, which lands on the plate of Balthus, hieratic traveller. He welcomes it hungrily, ready to ingest this mystery along with all the others that will make up a full meal-- wine, bread, and a bittersweet lemon-- when the main course shall have arrived. The artist, knife and fork at the ready, possesses with daemonic enthusiasm and confidence the means to carve up the sacred embodiments of the great mysteries, and make them part of himself. He claims and owns the table, that surface upon which mysterious reality becomes a sacrament, incarnate, and even tasty. The table is the stage of a great dramatic event, and it mimics the ground of the world beneath it, which is also securely, even tyrannically, owned by the wide, tense gesture of the artist's legs. Balthus, far from being a sufferer here, has imaged himself as the claimant to two levels of reality. Reality, full, undivided, monstrous, is embodied in the huge crayfish on a platter beside his right leg, set in the absolute center of the picture and completing the circle. This reality pulled from the depths may own a strange, inhuman form, but it can still be eaten; with such delectable *fruits de la mer* the artist regales himself.

It is without doubt a confident picture. Balthus escapes all the filial problems bound up in the artist's identity by actually becoming the cat. The claims of the father remain so strong and evocative that only by an absolute

denial of paternity (for it is always a human female, such as the Danae of “The Room” who submits to the embrace of an inhuman male) can the artist assert such a powerful sense of security. The initial aura of blasphemy and frivolousness in his manipulation of such inescapably Christian symbols is deflated when one reads his revision of their implicit stories aright. Indeed Balthus’ retelling makes the original stories more truthful and strange.

As in all of the artist’s paintings, there is a perfect equilibrium between the narrative images and the content to be dredged from them in the process of reading. The lighthouse, set on a peninsula to guide the seafarer into the harbor of tangible, controllable things, also occupies that half of the canvas inhabited by the cat-headed sailor. Its beacon lights not only the way from the sea to the land, but also the way out of chaotic, fluid and capricious nature into the world of those solid and unchanging realities which constitute the domain of art. Even the fish obey the law of change that travel from the left to the right side of the picture ordains, for, in the sea, they are fleeting, hermetic and mysterious beings, while upon land they submit to an aspect of form in becoming one’s food, mystery metamorphosed into nourishment. Balthus, the cat-sailor who, in gesture and shape, is identified with the lighthouse, sheds further light on the nature of the artist’s power by further rhyming the lighthouse with the bottle of wine. As in so many of Balthus’ works, figure and object lend meaning to each other as alternate versions of the same being; so cat-sailor holds knife and fork, those potentially violent instruments which serve to aid nourishment. As the

lighthouse and the bottle exist as alter egos for the image of the artist, so do the fish act this part for the girl in the boat. In their simple, lively curve, they mimic her wave of the arm and the slender form of her legs as they launch out of the sea. As it is always in the aspect of the young girl that Balthus images himself as a Christ figure, this particular parallelism should come as no surprise.

Balthus' preparations for eating the alter ego of the young girl recall that impression he gives which is most commonly remarked upon the predatory attitude of the artist towards young women. In this painting, that predatoriness is expressed more directly towards the heritage of Christianity than towards the opposite sex. The artist's predatory, amoral, voyeuristic propensities, so often noticed, are undeniably there, but as an obsession raised to the level of a great metaphor for his whole struggle with the vulnerable and attractive reality which constitutes his sense of a subject. The artist's relation to the subject matter he takes for his material must be at the same time detached and sexual, intellectually calm enough to lead to the most ruthless decisions, morbidly sensitive while absolutely unscrupulous. It is, in fact, this combination of sublimated immoralities that make of the artist a daemonic and voluntary outcast, such she is here represented, who fees on incarnated mysteries. Such a figure as Heathcliff in another incarnation might turn out to be, a man with the head of a beast who voyages constantly over swollen and uncaring waters. Though he may appear to be a monster, he is no less monstrous than reality itself. Like the crayfish, an incomprehensibly formed animal who can survive in

the sea or on land, the artist is another hybrid form of life who is constantly shifting the element in which he abides. No less cold or reprehensible than the lumbering crustacean, he is, despite his predatory coldness, no ore evil than it is. This painting, Balthus' cosmic statement about the artist's participation in the whole scheme of chaos and form, constitutes his last icon of the artist's nature, and presents a positive and definitive statement. From this time on he will no longer concern himself with the issue of the artist himself, but direct his attention to the nature of the aesthetic circumstance.

7. In the same year that he painted "The Méditerranée's Cat" Balthus returned to the tripartite structure for his portraits of the artist, the same he had used in "The Mountain" and "Cathy Dressing." In "The Week With Four Thursdays" (1949), we come upon the artist divided in three: he is there as the feline beast, the sexual/hieratic traveller; as the sensual, dreaming girl who lives the life of story, who is open to experience, and caresses the vividly perceptive, unsentimental cat with such natural ease; as the girl at the window, the intellectual aspect of Narcissus, who faces a rectangle that imposes order on her vision. This figure faced away from us is framed, as the entire image of the artist is framed by the canvas' edge in each of Balthus' paintings, by a rectangle which forces a severe structure upon what she observes outside. The rectangle we face, whether card, book, mirror or window, imposes form on the vision of the one who confronts it. This observing figure is the same figure as the tiny man

walking away over the whole, distant hill in “The Mountain,” as the man with the baguette/wand in “Passage du Commerce St. André.” It is the artist engaged in his current search, a figure whose face can never be seen, least of all by himself. The artist, with three such different faces-- the bestial/mysterious, the sensual, the observing-- is too complex and strange for the life the common man leads. He demands an unregimented, undominated time in order to flourish. In France, where there is no school on Thursdays, he should have a week with four Thursdays, a week whose large part is uncluttered by routines and plans. Balthus goes further in this painting that he has gone before, for he is not merely portraying the nature of the artist, he asserts what the artist requires in order simply to exist-- not merely political freedom, but the freedom of ample time, to travel, to dream, to observe.

In “Nude with a Cat” (1949), painted the same year, he same three figures recur, the girl at the window even more abstract, her red shoe lighting her tiptoe stance; she is even more apprehensively intent on the immediate moment of vision than before. The sensual girl is more unleashed in her rapturous openness, the cat more delightedly involved with her. Balthus’ message is clear: the artist’s experience of the sacred, the mysteries, is inextricably and joyfully enmeshed with the life of the senses; but the maker of order, the gazer into rectangles, the painter himself, must turn aside from both modes of intoxication.

11. In "The Fortune-Teller" (1956), the portrait of the artist veers from a concern with the composite nature of the artist himself, towards a preoccupation with the nature of the artist's activity. Here we find the same table as was used in "The Living Room," covered again with a veil, though this time it is not pulled back to reveal the smooth, firm surface of the table, and so the surface of the ground of being is entirely hidden by the golden, brightly-fringed cloth. The fortune-telling girl lays out her pattern of rectangles on this veiled surface, just as a painter relies on material objects such as paint to create a pattern we may read upon another veil, canvas. Balthus is the fortune-teller, who orders patterns of meaning and symbols on a surface that we may scrutinize them and see our fate imaged there. In this painting, perhaps more directly than in any other, Balthus gives the clue as to how all his work must be read. For, like the fortune-teller who manipulates the images of the Tarot deck, in each card of which a moment of the eternal stories is captured and frozen, he is not, in his complex arrangement of images, really speaking of the superficial subjects we see. The sleeping adolescents are only the superficial subjects of his allegory, as are the many bourgeois rooms, the streets, the landscapes. Balthus is using all of these images to talk about the subjects of eternal stories, which are also the subject of Tarot: of Destiny, Order, Fate and Passion, in his own manner of cabalistic manipulation. What the cards spell out is the great, inclusive eternal story in all its multifarious forms, that story in which every striding figure that breathes is engaged.

“The Fortune-Teller” is a portrait of the artist in the process of making. For, unlike the girl in “The Game of Patience,” this girl does not scrutinize a pattern already set out before her. She is engaged in a peaceful struggle with the cards; she is the calm, simple and innocent master, what the artist must seem to himself when he regular attainment of success, the habit of forging the new, has become so deeply ingrained that life cannot be imagined otherwise. She is Alice in the room at the bottom of the rabbit-hole, an Alice who, containing both order and passion in the balancing blue and red shapes of her dress, has gained control of her fate, has fit her size to the height of the table, close by the mantle which supports two gateways to another world, one in the looking-glass above it, one in the low, square door-way of the hearth below. Both the still, reflective wall of the glass, and the fiery passage below it indicate the two methods by which one may enter the world of other people’s stories, as intellectual gazer, as passionate participant.

12. In “The Moth” (1959) a concern with the artist’s identity has almost vanished; the picture concentrates entirely on the action portrayed, and it is in this moment’s true nature that the clue to this portrait finally lies. The young girl trying to capture the moth as it hovers before the dangerous lamp takes up the stance of an angel hailing, even as she performs an action which is the essential metaphor of aesthetic seizure. A living, ephemeral fragment of beauty flutters unconsciously in the vicinity of the consuming fire that will inevitably claim it at

last; the artist tries to hold it back for a moment, save it from its inevitable death, and in this moment of attempted capture, of recognition and hailing, becomes an angel by virtue of his act. Here Balthus has revised another great story of Christian painting, the story of the annunciation. There need be only one actor now, for the mere mortal is both blesser and blessed in this version. The artist has disappeared in this portrait, and what remains is a portrait of the moment of aesthetic seizure, the moment that saves us all, and makes earth into heaven for a while.

Footnotes:

* Robert Darnton , *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), p.89.

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** Balthus, preface by Rainer Maria Rilke, *Mitsou, Forty Images by Balthus* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984), pp.12-13.

Image Links for Works Discussed in Chapter Two, “The ‘Self-Portraits’”

“The Quays” (1929), at <http://www.anothermag.com/gallery/3088/balthus-and-cats/5>

“The Guitar Lesson” ((1934), at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balthus>

“The Street” (1929-33) at <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/balthus/the-street-1933>

“Cathy Dressing” (1933) at http://terresdefemmes.blogspot.com/mon_weblog/2008/09/6-septembre-193.html

“The Throne of Grace” in Colijn de Coter’s “The Throne of Grace, or The Holy Trinity with God the Son as Christ Supported by God the Father,” at <https://www.inkling.com/read/the-louvre-lesing-pomarede-1st/15th-and-16th-centuries/colijn-de-coter>

and “The Darmstadt Altarpiece” (painter unknown) at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:15th-century_unknown_painters_-_Darmstadt_Altarpiece_-_The_Throne_of_Grace_-_WGA23762.jpg

as well as Enguerrand Quarton’s “Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pietà_of_Villeneuve-lès-Avignon

“His Majesty King of Cats” (1935) at <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/balthus/the-king-of-cats-1935>

Delacroix’s “Self- Portrait as Hamlet” at <http://www.wikipaintings.org/de/eugene-delacroix/self-portrait-as-hamlet-1821>

“Portrait of André Derain” (1936) at <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/balthus/andre-derain-1936>

“The Victim” (1939-46) at <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/balthus/the-victim>

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